

HEAT, ICE, RICE?

Managing Sports Injuries

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Sprains, strains, and contusions happen often in youth sports. Hardly a practice or a game goes by without someone on the team getting injured. Even if the injury seems minor, treating it properly from the start speeds up returning to play.

How do different treatments work?

Rest – or relative rest – reducing activity prevents worsening the injury

Ice – reduces blood flow, thereby reducing swelling. Swelling causes stiffness and pain, and it delays recovery.

Use ice for 15-20 minutes at a time.

Compression – reduces swelling. Use an elastic sleeve or ACE bandage. It should fit comfortably snug.

Elevation – raising an injured area above the level of the heart lets gravity pull swelling out of the area.

RICE stands for Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation

Heat – increases blood flow to the skin and superficial soft tissue. Increasing warmth can soften tight tissue and reduce muscle spasm. This can help an athlete warm up and stretch injured muscles before exercise. It can also increase swelling, so avoid it in most cases of acute injuries. *Use it mainly to loosen tight muscles.*

There is an old myth that goes something like, “ice for the first 48 hours, then use heat.” Most injuries, such as ligament sprains, muscle strains, and contusions, need ice *until they are resolved*, not just 48 hours.

How To Treat Common Injuries

Contusion – a bruise from direct contact. Use RICE the first 2-3 days. Resume play when able to do so without favoring the area, such as a limp. Use a pad, elastic bandage, or elastic sleeve to reduce further contact and to prevent further swelling. Ice 20 minutes after playing until pain and swelling are gone.

Seek care if:

- *Unable to bear weight on a bruised leg or foot*
- *Pain radiates from the bruised area, such as up or down the leg*
- *Not improving the first few days*

Sprain – stretch of a ligament, such as twisting an ankle. Treat with RICE 24-48 hours, then begin rehabilitation exercises prescribed by a physician, physical therapist, or athletic trainer. Resume play when able to do so without favoring the area, such as a limp. Continue to use compression (or a brace) during play and use ice for 20 minutes after play.

Seek care if:

- *Unable to bear weight on an injured leg, ankle, or foot*
- *Unable to use the injured area for usual daily activities, such as opening a door with an injured wrist*
- *Pain radiates from the injured area, such as up or down the leg*
- *Not improving the first few days*

Strain – pain in muscle from sudden or gradual injury, such as a pulled hamstring. Treat with RIC (elevate only if swollen). Resume play when able to do so without favoring the area, such as a limp. Treat with warming up gradually, such as walking or stationary cycling, then gentle stretching, before playing. Use ice for 20 minutes afterward. Do rehabilitation if it is prescribed.

Seek care if:

- *Unable to bear weight on an injured leg, ankle, or foot*
- *Pain radiates from the injured area, such as up or down the leg*
- *Not improving the first few days*

What about anti-inflammatory medication?

Over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicine can speed recovery from acute injuries. They are usually not needed for more than 7 days. Follow directions on the bottle for dosing. Prescription doses are higher than over-the-counter doses. Ibuprofen, Advil, and Motrin have the same active ingredient. Aleve and naproxen have the same active ingredient. Do not take more than one of these medications at a time.

When do I need to see a physician for one of these injuries?

If the injury causes the athlete to favor the area, see a physician. Examples of favoring an area include limping, preferring not to land on the injured leg, and not swinging or throwing with the injured arm as hard as usual. Also, if the injury does not improve readily each day, see a sports medicine physician.